

First record and nesting of White-crested Tiger-Heron *Tigriornis leucolophus* in The Gambia

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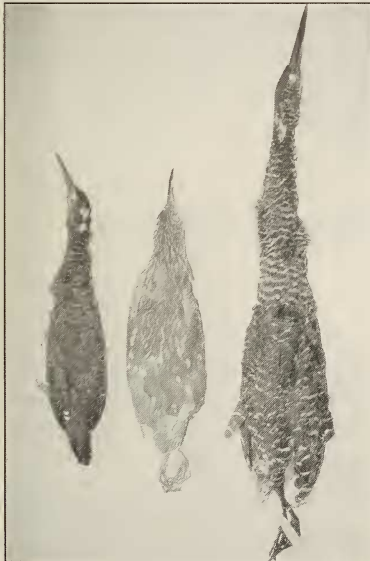
On 16 November 1996, members of an Ornitholidays tour to The Gambia observed two adult and a juvenile White-crested Tiger-Heron *Tigriornis leucolophus* in the Lower River Division. The birds were in narrow, mangrove-bordered creeks leading into the Gambia river. The first was seen standing amongst the mangrove roots on mud exposed by the receding tide but soon walked off and was lost to sight in the dense vegetation. In another creek at least 400 m distant, we found a second bird, which to our amazement was on a nest. It was seen only briefly before creeping away between the branches. The nest was a shallow platform of loosely woven twigs situated c2 m above the high-water level on a branch of Red Mangrove *Rhizophora* sp overhanging the creek. It was estimated to be c40 cm in diameter and ten cm deep and contained a single juvenile covered in white down, which was consid-



Juvenile White-crested Tiger-Heron *Tigriornis leucolophus* on nest, The Gambia, November 1996 (C.A.E. Kirtland)

ered to be approximately one week old. When left exposed on the nest, the juvenile adopted a typical 'bittern' posture with extended neck and bill pointing skyward. The nest was photographed and we then withdrew to allow the adult to return.

On 30 November, EPR and members of another tour also saw two adults in the same location. The first bird was seen on the edge of a muddy creek, where it had just caught an eel-like fish. It carefully washed the fish in the muddy water before arranging it securely in its bill. It then retired slowly a short distance from the water's edge and swallowed the fish whole before slinking off into the security of the dense vegetation. The second bird was again at the nest, which still contained the juvenile, a little larger but still covered in down. The adult was brooding with both wings outstretched, completely covering its offspring. Despite the engine of the boat being cut, the adult was very wary and immediately adopted the upright posture. After a short while it left the nest, creeping low along the stout branch. The juvenile, now exposed, sank into the shallow nest cup with only the white down of the back visible. The observers then left the site in order to disturb the birds as little as possible. There was no evidence to suggest that the two adults were a pair, as on both occasions they were a considerable distance apart.



Two White-crested Tiger-Heron *Tigriornis leucolophus* and a juvenile Black-crowned Night Heron *Nycticorax nycticorax* (middle) specimen, British Museum (Natural History section) (C.A.E. Kirtland)

At the time of the observation, the only description and illustration available to us depicted a bird with no buff barring on the upperparts and quoted a length of 76 cm⁵. The birds observed were conspicuously barred buff and black and also appeared shorter than 76 cm, although they were usually seen with necks retracted. An examination of specimens in the British Museum (Natural History), Tring showed considerable variation in the width of buff barring, from 3–10 mm. The length from bill-tip to tail-tip also varied markedly, more so than could be expected from differences in skin preparation. The largest, a male, was 81 cm; the smallest, a female, was just 56 cm. The white crest was not noted in the field but in the specimens examined, the white feathers were almost entirely overlaid by darker ones and not at all prominent. On neither occasion were any vocalisations heard; both observations occurred between 08.15 hr and 11.30 hr.

Rather surprisingly, only one other nest of this species has been described. Brosset¹ was shown a nest in Gabon on 22 January 1971, which was also situated on branches overhanging a creek, at a height of six m. This nest contained one egg and the adult proved difficult to see, moving away at the approach of observers, who had to conceal themselves for long periods in order to identify the bird.

Although little is currently known about the species' breeding biology, it is said to coincide with the rainy season and to be from May–July in the west of its range and November–January in the east^{2,3}. This, however, conflicts with a laying date of September–October quoted for Sierra Leone^{2,3} and our Gambian observations. The distribution of this species is in equatorial rain forest between 8°N–5°S and 13°W–

25°E, from Sierra Leone east to Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Gabon and the former Zaïre^{2,3}. The nearest part of its known range to The Gambia is Sierra Leone, c640 km to the south-west. This is not only the first breeding record in The Gambia but also the first documented record, although a previously rejected claim from 1982¹ should perhaps now be re-examined. The records have been submitted to The Gambia Ornithological Society Records Committee. Such an unobtrusive and retiring species, notoriously difficult to observe in its preferred habitat of dense riverine forest^{2,3}, could easily be overlooked and it is possible that small populations exist elsewhere outside its known range.

Acknowledgements

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References

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Golden Eagles *Aquila chrysaetos* in Ethiopia

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The recent reference to Golden Eagle *Aquila chrysaetos* in Ethiopia (*Bull. ABC* 2: 61–64) is overdue acknowledgement of the species' presence in north-east Africa, for there have been references to sightings of the species in Ethiopia since the early years of the present century. The earliest published reference is Reichenow⁵, who considered that the species might be a winter visitor but gave no details or locations. Zedlitz⁶ reported a sighting at Ela Bered (now Eritrea) in February 1908. The next records were 80 years later, in 1988, when it was included in a checklist of Ethiopian birds by F. Petretti¹. In view of

these records lacking substantive details, and that those in the early years of the 20th century may be based on hearsay, they are probably now best regarded as unproven.

Records in the late 1980s

The first of a series of recent sightings from the Bale Mountains, was of two adults and a subadult on 12–13 November 1988 (David Mills/Naturetrek). The following year there were two sightings – three individuals on several dates in November 1989 in the Bale Mountains National Park (David Mills/Naturetrek), and one